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Mail-Order Guns

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Washington.

The Treasury raiders found the inventory on the truck they had seized included 100 submachineguns, new M-14 automatic rifles, five tripod-mounted machineguns, flame-throwers, several 25-pound aerial bombs, mortars and live ammunition for all weapons.

This cache in Missouri is only one of many that have come to light in various parts of the country. It was linked to something called the Counter-Insurgency Council which seems to be an offshoot of the Minutemen, an extreme right-wing group calling for final armed resistance against the Communists in and out of government who, they say, are about to take over the nation.

An arms underground linked to apostles of hate and more or less open advocates of violence is a fact. How extensive it is no one seems to know. So widespread has been the purchase of weapons in the South by both whites and Negroes that sober observers regard certain areas as armed camps where an uneasy truce prevails in the racial war.

The hidden arsenal with all it can mean in turmoil and bloodshed underscores the struggle to enact a comparatively mild federal arms-control bill. Sen. Thomas J. Dodd (D., Conn.) has been trying for more than two years to persuade Congress to adopt a measure putting restraints on the mail-order gun business.

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Hundreds of pages of testimony have shown how these guns find their way into the hands of criminals, juvenile delinquents and psychopaths. Dodd himself testified a year ago on how the more flagrant of the mail-order houses circumvent state and local laws. He showed that three such firms ship into states having stringent firearms control laws so as to get around those laws.

Pennsylvania requires the purchaser of a concealable firearm to wait 48 hours before taking possession of the weapon. But one mail-order dealer had sent 100 firearms into Pittsburgh and over 150 into Philadelphia in a three-year period.

Over 1,500 guns were shipped into Chicago by one firm. The majority were foreign imports, the German Roscoe at $12.95 and the British Enfield at $14.95. These are weapons, Dodd testified, not used by hunters nor by target-shooters. They are used by juveniles and hoodlums of that city. He put into the record a photograph of a Chicago judge with weapons confiscated from teenagers piled high on his bench. The judge had said he collected a bushel basket of weapons every 10 days.

The Dodd bills would not abolish the mail-order gun business, but it would make such anonymous shipments impossible. The dealer would be required to ship weapons ordered by an individual to a reputable dealer in the area who would then be required to observe state and local laws.

But even this relatively mild proposal is opposed by the National Rifle Assn. The association with its 1,125,000 members, some of them in affiliated clubs, is the principal force holding back legislation on weapons. While gun manufacturers are not under the association's rules allowed to be members, officers of the big weapons companies are active in the group. The NRA denies it is a lobbyist organization, but by most standards it qualifies.

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The NRA is connected with the Defense Dept. through the

Board for Promotion of Rifle Practice, which makes surplus weapons available to NRA members. As an example, two years ago 150,000 M-1 caliber .30 carbines were sold for $20 plus shipping costs to certified NRA members. Last year the board sold 85,429 carbines, pistols and pre-World War II rifles for about $1,500,000.

An Army spokesman says that since the program was started in 1871 there has never been a problem of these weapons finding their way into criminal or psychopathic hands. The rule is one individual one weapon for life and less than 50 per cent of NRA members get surplus guns. Target-shooting has long been a favorite sport. The American rifle team took a gold medal at Tokyo, and one team member won an individual medal.

The root of the matter then is to sort out the legitimate users from the underworld of weaponry. In the view of most observers this can only be done through federal legislation. The federal firearms act has not been amended for 30 years and is woefully inadequate to cope with the flood of weapons, many imported from abroad and sold at bargain basement prices.

After the assassination of President Kennedy Dodd's proposal got earnest attention, since it was a mail-order rifle sent to a blind postoffice box that killed the President. Interest has languished in the intervening time despite continuing pressures for reform. With the start of new hearings Congress may be spurred into action.